

to my beloved community,

i have been blessed with a beautiful and impactful career in our community thus far, and in that time, i have worked with countless boards and dozens upon dozens of CEOs, but i have never encountered anyone quite like kirsten york. for the past 15 years, the community action council of lewis, mason, and thurston counties (CAC) has been gifted the talent, compassion, and relentless commitment of kirsten, and we are beyond grateful for that gift. she has carried this agency through challenges and numerous devastating crises, and was gracious enough to return to the agency to serve as the CEO in our greatest time of need three years ago. she came back without hesitation, sharing her positivity, dedication, and passionate leadership shining a clear path forward for our board, staff, and clients in one of our darkest times, providing us direction we could count on grounded in clarity, truth, and integrity. i am heart-broken to see her leave.

anyone who has encountered her knows that kirsten is a breath of fresh air. she is delightful, uplifting, and encouraging and she sees the capacity that we have as humans to do and be our best. she has taken on infinite challenges, and refuses to arrive at solutions on her own. she lives and breathes for collaborative teamwork, and it is the very foundation for her success as a leader. this commitment to power sharing has drawn incredible leaders to our agency's executive leadership team that carry on her legacy of leading in a unified way.

in her departure, kirsten has put together a succession plan that ensures the strong continuation of operations for the operation in her absence. this includes sarah miranda, mba our chief financial officer as the interim ceo. in her time at the agency, sarah has streamlined the organization's fiscal operations, bringing them into modernized, transparent, and organized structures that are easy to understand. many of you may know that appointing a CFO in times like these isn't a typical decision...neither is sarah. kirsten and i share absolute confidence in her capacity to lead this agency through the transition, and to provide the stability, leadership, and direction that the board, staff, and clients need to move forward successfully as a team.

in her time serving our community as the CEO of the CAC, kirsten was diligent and intentional about bolstering board engagement, increasing organizational transparency and enhancing member understanding. beyond providing board members deeper insight into the impact poverty has on the individuals and families in our service area, kirsten also brought training opportunities to activate the diversity, equity, and inclusion work to the agency. true to form, she was proactive in bringing resources from a proposed framework from the statewide community action partnership, and upcoming funder requirements from state and federal agencies for the organization. beyond just checking boxes, she made it clear that committing to doing this work is a crucial part of serving our community well.

as many of you know, taking a bold stand can be risky for leaders. what we don't talk about is how exponential that risk is when you look like me, or kirsten. AND. committing to equitably serving our community to make sure they are safe wasn't even a choice for kirsten, it was a given. her willingness to take this bold stand made a powerful difference for countless individuals and families...like mine. literally. the CAC kept me and my three little girls in our home during COVID. because of kirsten's commitment to serving folx inclusively, it didn't matter where i had been, or what i had been through...it mattered what i was facing at the time, which was being a former executive leader, unexpectedly unemployed, and soon to be without shelter in the middle of a pandemic. instead of being re-traumatized, my family was restored.

this is why committing to diversity, equity, and inclusion is foundational for any community work moving forward...and being steadfast isn't an option, it's an *obligation*. as leaders in our community, it's our responsibility to foster belonging for ALL, regardless of history, genetics, how folx identify, or who they love. if WE can't do that without question or hesitation, it's time for us to move out of the way and make space for the people who can.

our limitations as leaders do harm, and the violence it creates can no longer go with impunity. ignoring it is not an option. pretending it isn't happening is how you lose powerful leaders like kirsten, because the harm is happening whether WE acknowledge it or not. our collective habit of undermining of Black, Brown, and Indigenous leaders who are highly-skilled and equally-challenged every step of the way as they try to demonstrate their talent does harm. our collective protection of comfort over growth protects the status quo and does harm. our collective silence while WE watch harm occur is choosing to be a part of the problem and it does harm. WE have to commit to stop doing harm in our community. and WE have to do it now.

the reality of being a leader in an inequitable system is owning that WE are a part of the problem. the reality of being a leader in this specific situation at the CAC is knowing that we could have done more. the reality of this leadership transition that the agency is facing now is that WE needed to do a better job of keeping kirsten safe from harm. there is an obligation that organizations have when WE sign up to steward Black, Brown, and Indigenous brilliance in leadership positions. while WE cannot protect them, WE must prepare them with all of the tools to be successful, and back them up when they need us most. WE did not do that.

kirsten, WE are so sorry that WE failed you. you deserved so much better from us, and WE deserved to do and be better, too. thank you for sticking it out with us for as long as you did, and for teaching us the lessons WE needed to learn. WE are sorry it cost you as much as it did to teach us. WE will not waste the wisdom you gave us. it was truly a gift to learn with and from you, and WE will never be able to repay you. WE treasure you truly and completely.

friends, the journey ahead is going to be uncomfortable. regularly. it will be painful, challenging, and you will likely want to quit. often. you may find yourself wanting to shut down, lash out, or undermine the process. in those times, i encourage you to dig deep and find what's really at the source of your resistance. disruption in this space is not a threat to you, or your safety. it IS a threat to the status quo...but the status quo is hurting ALL of us.

moving forward, the CAC is committed to being a better partner to the community. WE have learned some really valuable lessons in this season, and the cost is far too high to repeat. WE are committed to carrying out our mission with our community thriving at the center, and WE understand that WE can't do that without acknowledging and repairing harm, while doing our best to prevent it in the future. WE are prioritizing doing the work of centering equity in how WE lead, so WE can actively foster spaces where WE can honor each other's humanity with the kind of dignity and belonging that WE ALL deserve.

with belonging and humanity for ALL,



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what's with the lowercase?

within my communications, you will find non-traditional orthography. this intentional practice in my writing serves as an intentional reminder for all of us to **diligently** question what lies at the core of our obedience to **all** things; a principle paramount to bringing about radical change. where we follow without examination, may we start interrogating **everything**; where we demand others sacrifice in the same ways we have chosen for ourselves, may we remember the moments we have been deemed **powerless**.